

SEX-ROLE DIFFERENTIATION: EXPLORING RACE DIFFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown contradictory patterns regarding sex role differentiation when comparing the black and white community. Researchers have reported that black males and females, when compared to white males and females, either do not perceive sex roles in bipolar terms and create an atmosphere of little sex role differentiation, or are more sex role stereotyped and create an environment where the roles of men are clearly distinguished from the roles of women. The results of this analysis support the argument that there is little sex role differentiation between black males and females when compared to white males and females. Furthermore, the sex role differentiation which exists within the white community is dependent upon educational attainment.

INTRODUCTION

Studies which have explored similarity in the sex role attitudes of males and females in different racial groups have failed to find consistent patterns of differentiation. On the one hand, some studies have shown there is less sex role stereotyping between black males and females when compared to white males and females (Unger 1979). These findings are often explained by the contemporary context of gender relations within the black community. In reference to black males, Staples argues

Their own lowly position has effectively prevented them from suppressing their women in the same manner that white males have dominated white females. They have been forced to adopt more egalitarian views towards the role of women as a result. (1978 179)

In addition, the extensive labor force participation and economic independence of black women, coupled with their egalitarian role in family decision making, have resulted in an integration of nontraditional roles within their sex role ideology (Malson 1983).

Indeed, both males and females are expected to be nurturant and expressive emotionally as well as independent, confident, and assertive. (Renzetti, Curran 1992 71).

As such, there is a between-sex similarity in reference of both occupational and familial roles within the black community (Unger 1979).

On the other hand, authors have argued that black males and females are as sex role stereotyped, and perhaps even more sex role stereotyped, than white males and females. Bayer (1975) in an analysis of a nationally representative survey of college entrants found that black students, when compared to white

students, were more likely to endorse sexist positions. Ransford and Miller (1983) in their analysis of a national NORC sample reported that black females were not more sex-role feminist in outlook than white females, and that black males were significantly more sex-role traditional than white males. And Hershey's (1978) analysis of racial differences in sex-role identities indicated that sex-typing and traditional sex stereotypes were at least as common among black respondents as among white respondents.

Perhaps these contradictory findings can be explained by educational attainment. Studies have clearly demonstrated that education has a liberalizing effect on opinions and attitudes and is viewed as one means through which sexism can be modified. Schreiber (1978) in an analysis of opinions towards voting for a woman for president found that egalitarian views were directly related to educational level. Thornton and Freedman (1979) in their analysis of change in the sex role attitudes of women demonstrated a substantial difference across educational groups, finding a positive association between education and egalitarian attitudes. Bayer stated:

...much of the feminist leadership is employed in colleges and universities and higher education is structured to introduce factual information and philosophies which could reshape the sexist ideologies of students. (1975 396)

Assuming then that education is operating in the same fashion for both blacks and whites, the contradictory patterns of sex role differentiation might be explained by educational differences. Thus, if education is considered, we should expect to find a similar pattern of differentiation between blacks and whites.

The purpose of this study will be to explore sex role differentiation within the black

Table 1: Zero-Order Correlations For All Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Sex	----										
2 Race	----										
3 Educ	-.070**	-.140**	----								
4 Fehome	-.031	-.065**	.361**	----							
5 Fepres	-.049*	.015	.202**	.412**	----						
6 Fepol	-.018	.004	.190**	.504**	.354**	----					
7 Fefam	.030	.025	.289**	.469**	.290**	.383**	----				
8 Fehelp	-.016	.011	.289**	.442**	.290**	.333**	.482**	----			
9 Fework	-.026	-.011	.223**	.276**	.145**	.122**	.232**	.240**	----		
10 Fechld	.134**	.032	.194**	.286**	.216**	.209**	.421**	.285**	.161**	----	
11 Feprsh	.140**	.046*	.128**	.252**	.166**	.180**	.466**	.297**	.145**	.476**	----
Mean	----	----	12.39	1.74	1.84	1.62	1.51	1.63	1.82	1.61	1.47
S.D.	----	----	3.17	.435	.364	.485	.500	.482	.382	.486	.499

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; Males=1, Females=2; White=1, Black=2; Traditional Response=1, Nontraditional Response=2

and white community to determine if race specific patterns exist as we move across educational levels.

METHODS

Sample and Measures

Data for the research were taken from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys. The NORC surveys are stratified, multistate, area probability samples of clusters of households in the continental United States. Combining data from the 1985-1986 samples, the study sample consisted of 2,857 white males and females and 336 black males and females over the age of eighteen.

Several survey items were directly related to sex role attitudes. Some questions dealt with women and politics: (fehome) "Women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up to men"; (fepres) "If your party nominated a woman for president, would you vote for her if she were qualified?"; and (fepol) "Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women."

Other questions dealt with the woman's position within the labor force: (fefam) "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside of the home and the woman takes care of the home and the family"; (fehelf) "It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself"; and (fework) "Do you approve or disapprove of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her?"

A third set of questions dealt with the

relationship between a working mother and her child: (fechld) "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work"; and (fepresch) "A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works."

Responses to all three questions dealing with women and politics and one question concerning the woman's position within the labor force, "Do you approve or disapprove of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her," consisted of agreement or disagreement with each of the statements. Responses to two questions dealing with the woman's position within the labor force, "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside of the home and the woman takes care of the home and the family" and "It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself," as well as both questions dealing with the relationship between a working mother and her child consisted of strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. All responses reflecting a traditional attitude were coded 1, while those reflecting a nontraditional attitude were coded 2.

The educational level of the respondents represented the number of years of school the respondents had completed, ranging from 0 to 20+ (8 years of college). The analysis was designed to compare the differentiation of attitudes about sex roles between blacks and whites by educational level. Race was controlled and the interaction term of (sex x education) was used to measure differentiation by

Table 2: Zero-Order Correlations for Blacks and Whites (in Bold)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Sex	----									
2 Educ	-.008	----								
3 Fehome	-.077**									
	.033	.431**	----							
	-.040	.343**								
4 Fepres	-.040	.194**	.325**	----						
	-.052*	.222**	.432**							
5 Fepol	.077	.210**	.566**	.327**	----					
	-.031	.196**	.497**	.357**						
6 Fefam	.032	.287**	.481**	.149*	.351**	----				
	.029	.297**	.468**	.306**	.387**					
7 Fehelp	.079	.309**	.399**	.178*	.308**	.356**	----			
	-.029	.300**	.453**	.302**	.335**	.495**				
8 Fework	-.037	.265**	.288**	.183**	.199**	.213**	.249**	----		
	-.025	.220**	.276**	.144**	.116**	.236**	.244**			
9 Fechld	.147*	.119	.326**	.188**	.265**	.384**	.164*	.074	----	
	.130**	.212**	.281**	.219**	.197**	.425**	.297**	.171**		
10 Feprsh	.121	.170*	.369**	.221**	.267**	.532**	.188**	.104	.498**	----
	.143**	.139**	.247**	.159**	.172**	.463**	.311**	.153**	.476**	
Mean	----	11.06	1.65	1.88	1.61	1.50	1.66	1.81	1.65	1.58
	----	12.59	1.75	1.83	1.61	1.51	1.63	1.82	1.61	1.46
S.D.	----	3.60	.475	.320	.487	.501	.472	.388	.475	.494
	----	3.03	.428	.368	.486	.500	.483	.380	.488	.499

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; Male=1, Female=2; Traditional Response = 1, Nontraditional Response = 2

level of education.

RESULTS

In Table 1 Zero-order correlations between the variables are presented. Only the independent variable of education displays a consistently significant association with the dependent variables. In each case the association indicates that as education increases, so too does egalitarian attitudes. It is also interesting to note that there are only moderate associations between the eight dependent variables.

Table 2 shows the Zero-order correlations between variables controlling for race. Again, the variable of education displays a consistently significant association with the dependent variables for both blacks and whites. Once again this association indicates egalitarian attitudes are associated with higher levels of education.

The core of the findings are presented in Table 3 which reports the results of the multiple regression analyses. Among black males and females (left side) we find six significant educational differences that do not differ by

sex. In each case, persons with higher levels of education are less traditional—or more egalitarian—in their attitudes toward: (fehome) women taking care of their homes and men running the country; (fepol) men being better suited for politics; (fefam) men achieving outside of the home while women take care of the home; (fehhelp) a wife helping her husband's career before her own; (fework) a married woman earning money in business if she has a husband capable of supporting her; and (fechld) a working mother establishing a warm and secure relationship with her child.

The unstandardized regression coefficients also reveal one significant interaction. When we consider (fepresch) a preschool child suffering if his or her mother works, we note that as education increases, sex role differentiation increases. First, there is not a significant sex or educational difference. However, the interaction between sex and education indicates that highly educated women, compared to highly educated men, become so nontraditional in attitude that sex role differentiation actually increases.

Among white males and females (Table

Table 3: Sex-Related Attitudes by Sex, Education, and Sex*Education for Blacks and Whites Separately

Variables	Blacks						Whites					
	N	a	Sex	Educ	Sex*Educ	R2	N	a	Sex	Educ	Sex*Educ	R2
Fehome	316	1.12	-.172	.046**	.017	.173	2523	1.27	-.289**	.039**	.021**	.129
Fepres	320	1.80	-.199	.008	.015	.038	2508	1.62	-.218**	.018**	.014**	.051
Fepol	313	1.32	.000	.023*	.004	.039	2490	1.34	-.214**	.022**	.015*	.038
Fefam	323	1.12	-.153	.034**	.014	.088	2540	.963	-.184*	.042**	.018**	.097
Fehelp	320	1.14	.129	.044**	-.006	.106	2507	1.13	-.269**	.040**	.021**	.102
Fework	325	1.50	-.086	.029**	.004	.086	2522	1.52	-.104	.024**	.007	.050
Fechld	323	1.27	.275	.025**	-.010	.054	2572	1.16	.001	.029**	.011	.062
Fepresch	327	1.41	-.226	.008	.031*	.054	2531	1.16	-.043	.017**	.015*	.041

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; Male = 0, Female = 1; Traditional Response = 1, Nontraditional Response = 2

3 right side) we find two significant educational effects that do not vary by sex. These interactions reveal that those with higher levels of education are less traditional in attitude when addressing (fework) a married woman earning money in business if she has a husband capable of supporting her and (fechld) a working mother establishing a warm and secure relationship with her child.

We also find six significant interaction effects. The first pattern is found on attitudes toward: (fehome) women taking care of their homes and men running the country; (fepres) voting for a woman for president; (fepol) men being better suited for politics; (fefam) men achieving outside of the home while women take care of the home; and (fehelf) a wife helping her husband's career before her own. In each case, there is a significant sex difference indicating that females are more traditional in their attitudes. There is also a significant educational difference indicating those with higher levels of education are less traditional in attitude. Yet, the interaction term indicates that with education, women make such a substantial movement towards a nontraditional attitude that sex role differentiation decreases between men and women with higher levels of education.

The second pattern is found on the attitude toward (fepresch) a preschool child suffering if his or her mother works. When we consider this variable, it is important to note that there is not a significant sex difference, but a significant educational difference which indicates that more highly educated are less traditional in attitude. However, the combined effect of sex and education indicates that the movement by females towards a nontraditional attitude actually increases sex role differentiation between the sexes at higher educational

levels.

DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis indicate that there is a difference in the pattern of sex role differentiation between black males and females when compared to white males and females. First, the analysis supports the argument that there is less sex role differentiation between black males and females. Secondly, this lack of sex role differentiation among black males and females remains constant even when education is considered. In contrast, the analysis of white males and females shows that the amount of sex role differentiation between the sexes varies according to educational attainment. In fact, as the level of education increases, sex role differentiation between white males and females decreases.

How then can we explain such very different patterns of sex role differentiation? As discussed earlier, part of the explanation may be due to the historical and social position of the black male (Staples 1978) or the integration of both traditional and nontraditional roles within the sex role ideology of the black female (Malson 1983). Yet it may also be that black males and females simply do not adhere to the dominant culture's traditional sex role attitudes as such attitudes are opposed to a common goal. Attitudes that create a competitive, rather than a cooperative atmosphere, will not aid black males and females in their unified effort to end racism. As Kane stated,

conflict between men and women over gender inequality within the black community may be muted by shared resistance to racial inequality, especially because racial oppression tends to have greater salience. (1992:312)

Even if black males and females are in agreement with the dominant culture's traditional sex role attitudes, black males and females often lack the means to act out these roles. Franklin and Pillow stated

our society today undoubtedly remains structured in such a manner that the vast majority of black men encounter insurmountable barriers to the attainment of a masculine status as defined by most Americans. (1986 110)

For example, when compared to white men, black men have a significantly higher rate of unemployment and there still appears a very large gap between the two groups when considering educational attainment. Complicating this situation is the fact that the median family income of blacks continues to fall below that of whites. This situation then often prevents black men from fulfilling an instrumental role, while at the same time making it necessary for black women to assume an instrumental role (Blackwell 1991).

For white males and females, however, conflict between men and women over gender inequality is not muted by racial inequality and therefore salient within the community. Furthermore, as found here, the gender inequality which exists is most salient among those who lack higher levels of education - those who are not exposed to liberal opinions and attitudes.

On a final note, we might consider the measures of sex role attitudes used in this analysis. While issues surrounding a woman's position and participation in the labor force may serve well to measure differentiation within

the white community, these same measures may not be effective measures of differentiation within the black community. For white women, working outside of the home has a greater element of choice; for black women, the greater element of choice is replaced by necessity.

Still this analysis confirms very different patterns of sex role differentiation between the black and white community and lays the foundation for further exploration.

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